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Max Lerner

WHAT INTELLIGENCE?

As my readers know, I waste my time shamelessly and incorrigibly on political suspense novels. A year or two ago I read one that seemed a bit amateurish and clumsy but held me all the way through.

It was "The Rope Dancer," by Victor Marchetti, and it was a hair-raising account of double-spy shenanigans inside the CIA. What made it the more hair-raising was that Marchetti had been a middle level employe of that mystery agency, and the publishers more than implied that he knew what he was talking about.

Since the character who served as the main foil to the hero was the Director of the CIA, and since he turned out to be a Soviet spy, you rubbed your eyes when you got through, and asked, "What goes on here?" There were few wickednesses in the calendar of political sins that the CIA in the story didn't practice.

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The Director-Spy, a slippery bureaucratic smoothy, could have been meant as a portrait of the actual Director. I knew Richard Helms very slightly, although I might have known him better if he had not barely escaped being my student at Williams College.

It was impossible for me to picture him in the role Marchetti had assigned to his Director. But so much else in the novel seemed authentic that the wild possibility might never quite get out of the addled and credulous noodle of the suspense reader.

Now Helms is out, having been rerouted as Ambassador to Iran, and the new Director—James Schlesinger—is an alumnus not of Williams but of the hard college that Richard Nixon runs for his White House assistants.

And Marchetti? Poor Marchetti is all strapped up like a mummy in a legal strait jacket, and can't get out to write another suspense novel without submitting it to his former employers for clearance. Ken McCormick, editor at Doubleday, has written feelingly about his plight.

It seems that when Marchetti got into the CIA labyrinth he took monastic vows, if not for poverty then at least for literary chastity and obedience. Now the federal courts won't let him out of the agreement he signed so unwarily 15 years ago, and the Supreme Court has refused to review their decision.

So there he is, unable to mine his past, because the federal courts see no crucial First Amendment freedoms involved in the case of secret intelligence. Evidently once you have signed away your literary freedom as a spy, it stays signed away. An ex-novelist will have no trouble becoming a spy, and may even find it a familiar metier; but an ex-spy can't become a novelist without keeping the Agency as editor and censor.

Maybe Marchetti is lucky at that. In every political suspense story I have read a really high class spy can't resign from his profession: he knows too much that isn't healthy to know.

The British writers have two ways of disposing of their ex-spies. Either they betray and kill them when they come in out of the cold, or else they send them off into the embraces of a mistress.

As for myself I recognize that an imperial republic must have a spy set-up. I don't know how good the American set-up is: probably not as good, man for man, dollar for dollar, as the Israeli or the Chinese.

But there are three things that dismay me about it. One is its cost, which is staggering, although just how staggering it is only a few people know, because to reveal it would reveal too much.

A second is the taboos we throw around it, on secrecy and controls. Even the courts, as the Marchetti case shows, give it a wide berth. Only the President doesn't, as witness Mr. Nixon's changing of the guard at the CIA because--so the Washington scuttlebut goes—Richard Helms showed more independence than the President thought appropriate.

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The third is semantic. It is a curious fact that the word "Intelligence," in American governmental agencies, applies only to secret intelligence about foreign countries, to help us in the strategies we apply to them in war and peace. And all the time what we need badly is a different kind of intelligence —the knowledge of what strategies to use in approaching our own knottiest problems—group tensions, addiction, crime, prison management, mental diseases, alienation.

I can't pretend to prescribe for our espionage establishment. But I have some notions—which I shall set down in my next piece—of what we can do to garner the best intelligence we can ferret out on our domestic ills and strategies.

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